THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Seeing Without Sight

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Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we, who have not seen, have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Prayer for the Day for the Second Sunday in Easter
Book of Common Worship

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SEEING WITHOUT SIGHT

Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." John 20:29

Merciful God, in this season of Eastertide we come again to be together and to hear again the good news that He is risen. Just as the first to hear it had trouble believing, and just as some doubted, so we find that our faith does not always fit intellectually, scientifically. Speak your good word to us and startle us with your truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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The Shroud of Turin is back, on the cover of *Time* Magazine and the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* Saturday. Yesterday, in the great Cathedral in Turin, a glass case containing a mysterious shroud bearing the clear imprint of a man went on display. Cathedral authorities expect three million people to line up to see the shroud over the next eight weeks. Seven hundred thousand have already made reservations, including Pope John Paul II.

The shroud has been around for centuries and you will recall that twenty years ago, in the midst of massive public interest, it was subjected to a battery of scientific tests to determine how old it was and if the image on the shroud was actually the image of a man, and how it got there. The speculation, of course, is that it is the burial shroud of Jesus, the large cloth wrapped lengthwise around his body after he was removed from the cross. There are, in fact, what appear to be wounds on the image in places that correspond to the biblical account of the crucifixion. Further speculation is that the image was burned into the cloth at the moment of resurrection.

So the scientists went to work and it was the final test, radiocarbon dating, that revealed the approximate age of the shroud as no earlier than the Middle Ages. So it was put away for safe keeping.

But interest in the shroud continued and flourished. The shroud even has a website and an organization of adherents in the USA and Britain who call themselves "shroudies."

So now, apparently, there is new evidence that radiocarbon dating may have missed something important and the pursuit is on again. The scholars who are genuinely interested in the shroud do not propose that its authenticity would prove anything, but I think that delectable prospect lingers closely beneath the surface. We live in a scientific, empirical age, a high-tech age that wants to trust its clinical, laboratory methods, its computers and data processors.

But every now and then we whimsically and longingly entertain the notion that science, empiricism and technology may not be the only way to know truth and meaning. *Time* commented, "What is under attack

here is an apparently pure application of the scientific method that the West has taken for granted since the days of the Enlightenment....In the Turin Cathedral an act of rebellion is under way."

Would you stand in line to see it if you were in Turin this week? I would. I expect I'd be impressed by it, maybe even moved – as my own American empiricism confronted an image so reminiscent of the crucifixion of Jesus. The Church, by the way, understands that religious relics don't prove anything but have a way of dispensing grace to people who not only look at them but venerate them. So I'd like to see it – and while I'm absolutely honest, I wish someone would say, "This is it, this is the real thing. Those are the marks of his wounds where he was whipped and stabbed and pierced, and here is where the crown of thorns penetrated his forehead, and the image is there because in a divine burst of love, the heat of life returned to his dead body and he walked out of the tomb. Here – here is the indisputable evidence. It happened the way the Bible says it happened and here is the proof."

This religious business would be a little easier, would it not, if we had some tangible, certifiable proof; if we didn't have to listen to that little voice in our brain that keeps suggesting that it's not true, it's wishful thinking, a nice idea, but not true precisely because you cannot prove it the way we prove most things. You cannot know it – any of it – in the same way we know most of what we know.

And so the patron saint for the post modern, high-tech, scientific world of the present and immediate future is Thomas, who would surely be first in line to see the Shroud of Turin.

On the evening of the first day of the week, after the momentous events of the Passover weekend, the friends of Jesus are still hiding in that room. Devastated by his crucifixion – the speed with which it happened, the violence and brutality, the rage of the mob, the complicity of the religious leaders, the brute force of Roman rule – they were devastated and frightened and it occurred to them that it would not be a good idea to be identified publicly as his followers. So they were hiding. They dismissed the testimony of the women about what had happened at the tomb as an "idle tale." Peter had returned breathlessly from visiting Joseph's garden to say that the body was gone. But Peter, everyone knew, was given to hyperbole. "I'll die before I'll deny you," he had boasted publicly hours before he did just that, three times denying ever knowing Jesus.

And then it happened to them. He was there in their midst. He spoke to them – commissioned them – he stood there living and breathing and then he was gone and they were stunned, sure they had experienced his presence, each of them. One was not present. Thomas missed the experience...."Thomas! Thomas! You won't believe what happened! He was here. He stood right there and spoke to us. It was him. We saw the scars on his hands and feet. And then he disappeared."

"You're right. I don't believe you."

Distinguished New Testament scholar Raymond Brown points out that the Greek is strong and emphatic, "I'll never believe that!" is more like what Thomas said. "Are you crazy? A dead man appearing here? That can't happen. It didn't happen."

"But it did – we saw it."

"Well…I'll believe it when I put my finger in the nail holes in his hands."

I actually like that about Thomas. I also wonder why he wasn't hiding in the room with the rest of them. The answer may be that he wasn't as afraid as the rest of them, or he wasn't as melodramatic. We do know a little about him. When Jesus decides to go to Bethany because his friend Lazarus has died and the rest of his friends are objecting and trying to persuade him not to go because Bethany is near Jerusalem and he could be arrested or stoned, it is Thomas who rallies them. "Let us also go, that we may die with him." [John 11:16]

And at the last supper when Jesus begins to speak cryptically and somewhat vaguely about his death, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places….I go to prepare a place for you….I will come again….You know the way to the place I am going." It is Thomas who says what everybody is thinking, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

So we know Thomas is brave and honest as well as skeptical. He is a practical man, strong, reliable, no-nonsense, courageous and honest. Frederick Buechner speculates, "Imagination was not Thomas's long suit. He called a spade a spade. He was a realist."

Buechner speculates that Thomas didn't get as worked up as the rest of them and instead of sitting around behind locked doors, he was outside sitting on a park bench feeding the pigeons. [*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 165-166]

I think he was trying to figure out a way to get everybody out of that room; out of Jerusalem and back to Galilee. Or maybe he was the only one brave enough to venture out for food. In any event, he wasn't there when Jesus appeared. And when he returned and heard about it, he didn't believe it, for which he has been known ever since as "doubting Thomas." Frankly, I prefer "honest Thomas," "brave Thomas."

There is a positive role for skepticism and doubt.

Joseph Priestley + Louis Pasteur

The late Lewis Thomas wrote that the story of medical science is the story of doctors courageous enough to doubt conventional wisdom. Science itself is the story of researchers who doubt that the truth is yet fully known. Copernicus, Galileo…doubted the truth that was available to them. Louis Pasteur doubted that a small amount of rabies virus injected under the skin of an infected patient would be fatal.

There is an important role for doubt in the political arena. It took monumental moral courage to doubt that we were being told the truth about what was happening in Vietnam and it turns out we were not being told the truth. Political scientists know that Fascism would have a difficult time catching on here because of American skepticism. "Oh, yeah – prove it!" may be one of the most important declarations of a free society.

And there is a role for doubt in religion.

William Placher is an important theologian who teaches at Wabash College. He will be around Fourth Church this spring as our guest and I hope you will get to know him when he's here. Placher thinks that modern men and women speak too confidently about God and reminds his students and readers that we

begin with God's mystery and otherness and that a God who is understandable and fits into human intellectual categories is not God, but our creation. Placher wants us to remember Luther's idea of the "hiddenness of God" and suggests that the honest doubter, the one who struggles with the faith and humbly acknowledges the limits of human reason – even theological reason, may be the most honestly Christian.

Someone quipped recently that the three most under-used words in the religious vocabulary are "I don't know."

The philosopher Pascal said, "I am astonished at the boldness with which people undertake to speak of God." (Pensées)

One of the great gifts the late Joseph Sittler gave to his students at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago was his intellectual humility. Theology begins, he said, with intellectual modesty, with an acknowledgement that the very nature of the subject at hand exceeds the limitations of my intellect. That gift fosters something that is all too rare in religious discourse, namely, respect for opinions that are different, conclusions that are different, theologies that are different, religious practices that are different. That theological modesty suggests that dialogue and conversation rather than argument and conflict are the characteristics of faith.

My guess is that many of us struggle with our faith intellectually, that our believing is inconsistent at best, that we struggle with doubt, that we wish we didn't doubt so much, that we feel a little uncomfortable – perhaps even guilty, that we say things we don't wholeheartedly believe or understand. My sense is that there are a lot of people who don't join the church because of the notion that doubters are second class Christians or that belonging means being absolutely intellectually certain about one's personal theological system.

Thomas the honest and brave is a patron saint for our time.

Thomas becomes a believer ultimately. Tradition has it that he took the faith all the way to India. There's no way to prove that either, but when Vasco de Gama and his Portuguese explorers finally arrived in India around 1500, they were astonished to discover that the Christian church was already there, with a thousand year-old tradition and that it attributed its origins to Thomas.

Be that as it may, I'm intrigued by the moment when brave and honest and practical Thomas becomes a believer. He asks for evidence, remember. Not merely the same evidence as the others who saw Jesus. Thomas doesn't trust them and he doesn't trust his own eyesight. His sight has deceived him before – just like yours and mine has. Thomas wants to touch – feel – put his finger in the actual wound. Until he does that, he will not believe.

And then, one week later, the way John tells it, they're still hiding in that room and it happens again and this time Thomas is there and this time Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Put your hand here."

And you know what happens? Thomas doesn't do it! The empirical truth he demands is there – in front of his very eyes and he declines. In that moment, something happens in his heart – not simply his mind.

In that moment Thomas makes a decision and decides to give his life to follow, all the way to India if necessary, to commit everything he is and everything he has to God and God's kingdom as it is expressed in this Jesus, crucified and risen. Thomas declines to touch and decides something far more important – instead of touching, he says, "My Lord and my God."

I got the title for this sermon, "Seeing Without Sight," from an article I read on courage, entitled *Baking Bread in the Dark.* It was about an elderly woman who lives alone and is blind. She lost her husband early in their marriage, went to work, raised two daughters and maintained her home. Over the years, she supplemented her income by baking wonderful, melt-in-your-mouth sourdough bread. When her daughters left home, she kept baking bread but now gives it away to her friends.

And then she began to lose her sight. Macular degeneration was the diagnosis, a particularly severe case that progressed from partial sight to almost total blindness quickly. How to live? How to carry on? How to bake bread? Who would blame her if she at least stopped baking her bread?

But instead of submitting to the darkness, she made an important decision. Baking bread enabled her to express her love, express the best of who she was, and she wasn't going to stop doing that even if she couldn't see. So she mixes from memory. And she finds the dials on her stove and bakes in the dark.

It's risky. She's never quite sure of herself...but she has decided to bake in the dark, to be without sight, to see without sight. [*Weavings*, May/June 1997]

Believing is like that...a matter of heart as well as mind; a matter of commitment as well as reason.

God, after all, is not always reasonable. The excesses of divine love, William Placher observes, are not reasonable. That God should love us in spite of our undeserving is not reasonable.

And so you and I struggle with what evidence there is and struggle with what doubt we experience and at some point make a decision – a leap of faith – a commitment to believe, to be his man, his woman, with everything in us, for all of our days.

That is the invitation that comes to you and me – a week after the events of Easter morning. To experience the risen Christ in our midst, and like Thomas, to reach beyond intellect and reason to the very depth of our hearts and to say quietly, "My Lord and my God."

Amen.